

John Ortberg tells the story of Tattoo, a Bassett Hound, that went on an evening run he wasn't planning. Tattoo's owners drove him their car to the park, but when they came home, Tattoo was still outside their car, but his leash had been shut inside the door. A passing policeman saw Tattoo's dilemma:

Behind the vehicle was a basset hound picking up his feet and putting them down as fast as he could.  
(Officer Terry Filbert)

Tattoo was rescued, but not before the dog had reached a speed of 20 to 25 miles per hour, rolling over several times.

This is what a basset hound looks like when it's running fast. And that is what many of us look like when our working days are like Tattoo's evening run – picking up our feet and putting them down as fast as we can.

This is what a basset hound looks like after a lot of running. It a visual approximation of how many of us feel about our work; we're exhausted just thinking about it.

When it comes to work, we Australians aren't a particularly happy lot. Last year the Australia Institute released their fifth annual survey of our attitude to work. Here were some of their findings:

- More than half of Australia's workers are unhappy with their working hours. 28% of us are working more hours that we would like, while 24% of us want more hours. We are a nation where a majority of us feel either over or under employed.
- A staggering 2.9 million of us regularly lose sleep because of work stress.
- For the fifth year in a row, the number of us dissatisfied with our work has grown. When it comes to work, we are an increasingly unhappy mob.

The report findings summarised the state of Australian work life in 2013 this way:

The current labour environment is creating high levels of stress, depression and poor sleep patterns for many Australians, with adverse effects on their health, family life and relationships.

It is all, frankly, pretty depressing. I know through conversation that the report findings are not unknown to many of us. Many of us here this morning feel overworked. A sizable proportion of us feels underemployed, or are struggling with unemployment – or at least under-appreciated. Some of are so stressed we're waking up in the middle of the night with work induced worry.

It makes you wonder whether the goal of job satisfaction is as allusive as the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow – just a teasing mirage, rather than a real possibility. Does our negative experience of work make a lie of the claim that work is actually a blessing? If that is so, if work is a blessing, how is it possible for us to experience it that way – as a blessing?

Dissatisfaction with work is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomena. In fact, around 3000 years ago, tradition has it that King Solomon, a man with supernatural wisdom, as an old man looked back over his life and said these words:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”  
What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?  
(Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)

That is right at the start of the book of Ecclesiastes. And it goes downhill from there. This is not a book to read when you're feeling a little fragile. In chapter 2, he says:

When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.  
(Ecclesiastes 2:11)

Remember that Solomon was the epitome of success in the ancient world. Under his rule, Israel had expanded its borders significantly. In his day, he was the richest man in the known world. The bible tells us that he would receive 25 tonnes of gold every year from surrounding nations in taxes and tributes. He was also a statesman par excellence – with kings and rulers

travelling to Jerusalem seeking out his wisdom. He was a builder – responsible for the completion of the Jerusalem Temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. Businessman, statesman, politician, builder and architect – Solomon was successful in nearly everything he turned his hand to. And yet, looking back over his life, this is what he says:

Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands.  
(Ecclesiastes 5:15)

Of course, taken literally, Solomon is right – there are no roof racks on funeral hearses – we take nothing with us into the next life. But, does what we do in this life with the work of our hands have any eternal consequences at all?

My answer is yes, absolutely! This is not my opinion, or my hope, but I believe what the bible actually teaches – that the results of our work can carry over into eternity. In contrast to Solomon who bemoans the meaninglessness of work, the Apostle Paul makes a bold and striking claim about the meaningfulness of work when he writes this to Christians in Corinth:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.  
(1 Corinthians 15:58)

Solomon, with all his success, looks back over his life and says our toil is all in vain – a chasing after the wind. Why does Paul seem to have a completely contrasting view? For the rest of the message I want to explain why, and why it means that we enjoy something far more valuable than any fleeting sense of 'job satisfaction'.

First, we know where we fit into The Story.

The bible is a library of 66 books, different genres, different human authors, written over different centuries – but with the one main, central character. The Bible, both the Old and New testaments, is God's story from beginning to end – and it is a story we find ourselves in.

NT Wright suggests that it can be helpful to view the bible like a five act play, in which God is the scriptwriter, producer, director and central character.

Act 1 is Creation, where the triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit breathes the Universe into being, all that we can see, touch, taste and smell and even imagine at the outer edges of space. From Nano particles to black holes – God made it all – including women and men – the pinnacle of all Creation. Creation is Act 1.

Act 2 to is The Fall. To bear the image of God was not enough for us – we wanted to be God. So Adam and Eve rebelled against God and ate the forbidden fruit. Their sin is our sin; the sin of ignoring God is on endless repeat in our lives. Again and again and again we turn our back on God in small and large ways. As the result of the fall, our lives, AND our world was fractured and stained. The Fall is Act 2.

Act 3 is Israel. God did not abandon his fractured world, but resolved to heal and restore it, through Abraham forming a new nation, a covenant people, a people of promise, to be a light to the nations of God's redeeming, restoring and reconciling love for all people. First through the patriarchs – like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses – then through the Kings – such as David and Solomon – and finally through the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others – Israel, even in its constant cycle of sin and rebellion, was fed and nourished by the gracious word of God – and testified to the nations to Yahweh. Israel is Act 3.

Act 4 is Jesus. Through Israel and her prophets, God promised a Messiah who would establish an eternal kingdom in which all things would be made new, and sin and its consequences would be no more. Through his teaching, Jesus described this new kingdom, and in his death and resurrection, he established its foundations. At the end of Act 4 stands the empty tomb and empty cross and a new, eternal kingdom established. Jesus is Act 4.

Act 5 is the Kingdom of God. At the cross, sin and death was defeated, vindicated by the empty tomb. This victory ushered in the Kingdom of God, which will culminate when Jesus comes again, and with him heaven and earth reunited in glorious, sinless, death defeated unity. Again and again the book of Revelation speaks of the end of days when with the New Jerusalem – a heavenly city - coming down to earth. At the end of Act 5, we do not escape to a 'pie in the sky' heaven of fluffy clouds and harp playing angels.

Heaven, as Jesus teaches us to pray, comes to earth and makes all things new. Revelation tells us that the symbol of this new heaven and earth are fruit bearing trees that will line the streets of a new Jerusalem – the place of God’s full and free presence, and our eternal reward. The Kingdom of God is Act 5.

And this is where we live our lives in God’s story - in Act 5. We live between a tree in the heart of a garden and trees lining the streets of a new city. We live between the tree of the kingdom inaugurated and the kingdom that will culminate.

Tim Keller puts it beautifully when he says that Jesus bore the tree of death so we could inherit the tree of life.

Jesus - the word through whom all things were made, the word that became flesh – is now the word that is making all things new.

Saturday, the last day of the week, was the day God rested after creating the Universe. Sunday – the first day of the week - the Lord’s Day – when Jesus was raised from the dead – is the day God in Christ began to restore all things.

You may well be thinking, ‘So what – what does this esoteric conjecture about the span of history have to do with my Monday to Friday work like?’ That is a good question. I’d like to suggest it has everything to do with it, if we will allow it.

You see, we live and work and serve – do life – in Act 5 of God’s story, somewhere between the end of Acts and the closing scene of Revelation. We are characters in the story – history – His story – God’s story. And here is the astonishing good news; we don’t just observe God making all things new; he invites us to participate with him in the process through our work. Let me go back to Paul’s words in Corinthians:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.  
(1 Corinthians 15:58)

‘Therefore’ is one of the most important words in the bible, usually linking a command with an important argument. In this case, in the first 57 verses of the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, Paul has passionately defended the historical reliability of the resurrection of Jesus, and then speaks eloquently of the physical, bodily resurrection of those who trust Jesus as savior and Lord. He says that in light of this promise – therefore - be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

‘In the Lord’ your labour is not in vain.

‘In the Lord’ your labour won’t simply be a chasing after the wind.

‘In the Lord’ the results of your work won’t be here today, gone tomorrow.

‘In the Lord’ your work will, in ways we cannot fully understand, echo into eternity.

N.T. Wright puts it beautifully this way:

What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself – *will last into God’s future*.  
(N.T. Wright)

Our labour – our work with God and his strength – is not in vain. It will last in ways we cannot fully comprehend, into God’s future. If you think this all sounds like wishful thinking, Jesus himself spoke this promise when he said this:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.  
(John 15:16)

The striking thing about this verse is not Jesus’ claim that we will bear fruit, but that it will be fruit that lasts. Fruit is either eaten or it rots – either way it is consumed. We might delay the process through preservation techniques, but fruit does not last.

Jesus seems to be saying that work done in his name, will do the opposite. This is fruit that will last – will spill over and echo into eternity.

Work done in Jesus' name is not in vain; it will produce fruit that will last.

Adoniram Judson was a missionary to Burma, or Myanmar as it is today. He arrived in the country in 1812, and died there thirty-eight years later in 1850.

During that time, he suffered much for the cause of the gospel. He was imprisoned, tortured, and kept in shackles. After the death of his first wife, Ann, to whom he was devoted, for several months he was so depressed that he sat daily beside her tomb. Three years later, he wrote: God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I cannot find him.

But Adoniram's faith sustained him, and he threw himself into the tasks to which he believed God had called him. He worked feverishly on his translation of the Bible. The New Testament had now been printed, and he finished the Old Testament in early 1834.

There were only somewhere between twelve and twenty-five professing Christians in the country when he died 38 years after his arrival, and there were not churches to speak of.

At the 150th anniversary of the translation of the Bible into the Burmese language, Paul Borthwick was addressing a group that was celebrating Judson's work. Just before he got up to speak, he noticed in small print on the first page the words: "Translated by Rev. A. Judson." So Borthwick turned to his interpreter and asked him, "Matthew, what do you know of this man?"

Matthew began to weep as he said,

We know him—we know how he loved the Burmese people, how he suffered for the gospel because of us, out of love for us. He died a pauper, but left the Bible for us. When he died, there were few believers, but today there are over 600,000 of us, and every single one of us traces our spiritual heritage to one man - Adoniram Judson.

But Adoniram Judson never saw much fruit of his labour in his earthly life, but in heaven he has met hundreds of thousands who trace their eternal destinies to his faithful work. His labour was not in vain.

Let me share a personal story. My maternal grandmother, Gran Agnew, was a godly woman who died when I was in my early 20's. I was gran's oldest grandchild, and I like to think, her favourite. Like most grandmothers, she loved to shower me with gifts. I was an avid reader from an early age, and Gran would often give me a book for my birthday or at Christmas. On one occasion – I can't remember how old I was – 9 or 10 perhaps – Gran gave me this book. Written by a Jewish Christian, David Kossof, it's a retelling of Old Testament stories in novel form. I read it again and again and again. For the first time, the bible came alive to me, even though at that stage I had not made my own commitment to follow Jesus. I can trace my fascination with the bible, and my conversion, to that book – that prayerful, careful gift from my Gran – her 'work'.

Roll forward ten years and I am 19 years old and my fascination with the bible has resulted in me stepping out to preach.

Roll forward another ten years and I am in Bible College studying to be a pastor.

Roll forward another 18 years and here I am standing in front of you today.

I don't know how it works in the whole time-space continuum, but Gran either has met in heaven, or will meet in heaven people who are there because she gave a know-it-all nine year old a book of bible stories retold.

Her labour in the name of Jesus was not in vain. Her work is fruit that lasts, and will for eternity.

Bob Goff says to:

Be ambitious about things that last.  
(Bob Goff)

Things that last – things that will echo into eternity – is work done with God, in his strength, and for his glory.

You might be thinking that there is no possibility for the results of your work to reach into eternity. Yours is a mundane job – a series of thankless tasks. But ‘in the Lord’ our labour is not in vain; no work done with God and in his strength is wasted, nor unimportant.

John Maxwell tells the story of how, during World War II, when Britain was experiencing its darkest days, the country had a difficult time keeping men in the coalmines. Many wanted to give up their dirty, thankless jobs in the dangerous mines to join the military service. Yet their work in the mines was critical to the war.

So prime minister [Winston Churchill] faced thousands of coal miners one day and told them of their importance to the war effort, how their role could make or break the goal of maintaining England's freedom.

Churchill painted a picture of what it would be like when the war ended, the grand parade that would honor the people who fought the war. First would come the sailors of the navy. Next would come the best and brightest of Britain, the pilots of the Royal Air Force, who fended off the German Luftwaffe. Following them would be the soldiers who fought at Dunkirk.

And, last of all would come the coal-dust-covered men in miners' caps.

Churchill indicated that someone from the crowd might say, "Where were they during the critical days of the struggle?" And the voices of thousands of men would respond, "We were in the earth with our faces to the coal."

As Churchill spoke, tears appeared in the eyes of the hardened men – coal miners. And they returned to their inglorious work with steely resolve, having been reminded of the critical role they were playing.

Paul says this to Colossians:

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.  
(Colossians 3:17)

No work done ‘in the name of Lord’ - with God, and for his glory, is either unimportant, or wasted. It will bear fruit that lasts. It will echo into eternity.

Psalms 45 opens with this wonderful phrase:

My heart is stirred by a noble theme?  
(Psalm 45:1)

Here are my questions:

Is your heart – is your life – guided by a noble theme?

Is your work a means simply to make a name, or a vehicle to honor the Name?

Are you spectating the Fifth Act, or living in it as a participant – a character – in God's story – His-story?

There's an old story of a man who stumbles onto a building site where three stonemasons are at work chipping away with hammer and chisel chipping away at stones.

The man said to one, "What are you doing?"

The stonemason said, "I'm chipping a stone."

The man walked over to the second mason and said, "What are you doing?"

He answered, "I'm building a wall."

The man walked over to the third mason and said, "What are you doing?"

This mason answered, "I am building a cathedra!"

The third man's heart was stirred, and his work was guided by a noble theme. Yours can too.

In the Lord, our work is never simply chipping stones, or even building walls. In the Lord – with God – we are people of the fifth act participating in the building of the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus life, death and resurrection – to be completed in glorious wonder when Jesus comes again.

No work done in Jesus' name is mundane, or without meaning or purpose. Every work done in his name is a sacred act with eternal dimensions.

NT Wright puts it far more eloquently than I ever could:

What you do in the Lord is not in vain. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's about to be thrown into the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site.

You are – strange though it may seem, almost as hard as the resurrection itself – accomplishing something that will in due course become part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow non human creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honoured in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.

This is the logic of the mission of God. God's recreation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Jesus and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there.

Let me ask the questions again; Is your heart stirred by a noble theme? Is your work about making a name, or honoring the name? Will your work end in chasing the wind or in deeds that echo into eternity?